

For Sam & Alma

Warren Report sparked

By BENTLEY ORRICK
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FREDERICK, Md. — The nick in John F. Kennedy's necktie. The pattern of Lee Harvey Oswald's shirt. The bullet fragments in Gov. John B. Connally's wrist.

Harold Weisberg has been pondering those sorts of clues for a quarter century now. There is meaning in them for him. He has made their study his life's work.

He is a keeper of the faith whose core belief is that the crime of the century has not been solved.

He is firm in saying that Oswald, while somehow involved, never fired a shot, not at Maj. Gen. Edwin A. Walker, not at Dallas Patrolman J.D. Tippit and certainly not at President John F. Kennedy.

There is a conspiracy, he is sure, but he admits he cannot name the conspirators.

He broods for a minute. "It's the most subversive crime possible in a society like ours. It has the effect of a *coup d'etat*."

His dander rises. "This is the biggest lie in American history," he declares.

He is sitting in an overstuffed chair, his legs, nearly crippled by phlebitis, propped in front of him, sipping a whiskey. The afternoon sun is slanting low. A cool fall night is coming to the Catoclin Mountains not far from the Camp David presidential retreat.

Except for the occasional call of a bird or the chatter of a squirrel, it is quiet on this back road, seemingly light-years from the few seconds of terror and confusion of Dealey Plaza 25 years ago that has become his obsession.

Weisberg is one of a small band of solitary researchers scattered around the country who still spend most of their waking hours puzzling over the questions left by an assassination whose details still color their dreams.

He's 75 now, and his trips to Washington are fewer and more likely to be because he needs to see a medical specialist rather than to plunge once again into the National Archives and once again immerse himself in the assassination documents he knows so well.

"I'm the first member of my family going back to antiquity who was born in freedom," Weisberg says of his Ukrainian-Jewish heritage. "I have promises to keep."

He was a newspaper reporter as a lad in Delaware. Then he took a government job during the Great Depression as a Senate investigator in the coal fields of West Virginia's "Bloody Harlan" County. World War II



Tribune photographs by BENTLEY ORRICK

Harold Weisberg, a pioneer assassination researcher, peers into one of the 60 filing cabinets in his basement.

found him in the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the CIA, "as an analyst, not a spook."

He retired from the bureaucratic rat race and made himself "the best chicken farmer in America, with the awards to prove it."

On Nov. 22, 1963, he heard the United Press International news flash from Dallas over a transistor radio while he was going from the second bank to the third bank in his henhouse gathering the afternoon's crop of eggs.

He went back to the farmhouse and settled in for the duration in front of his "old round-tubed Zenith TV."

"You know, dear," he says he said to his wife, Lilian, as Oswald was paraded out for reporters Saturday night, "this poor S.O.B. is going to get killed. It's not possible to give him a fair trial."

Jack Ruby proved him right the next morning.

He waited, like most Americans, until the Warren Commission Report came out 10 months later. Unlike most Americans, he bought a full set of 26 volumes for \$76. Unlike most Americans, he read it.

He didn't believe it then. He doesn't believe it now. Weisberg's chicken farming soon took second place

25-year obsession



Marion M. Johnson, the custodian of the Kennedy assassination material, holds the Mannlicher-Carcano.

to his investigation of the assassination.

He began a cottage-publishing industry that doesn't keep him in cottage cheese but does get out the word beyond the contentious circle of full-time Warren Commission critics. The first book was titled "WHITEWASH: The Report on the Warren Report."

His research continued. Every year or so, another "WHITEWASH" would be produced. He would write it out in longhand. Lillian would do the typing, for he had never learned. The typescripts and Xeroxes of government documents would be pasted up, photographed, taken to a printer, run off and bound in paper, some to sell out, others to remain in cartons in his basement.

Now, with the twilight creeping into the Catocins, he doesn't claim to have solved the crime of the century.

"You have to differentiate between whether or not there was a conspiracy, and any particular conspiracy theory," he says. Clearly there was a conspiracy, "because the crime is beyond the capability of one man."

"The reason we can't responsibly go further is because the crime itself has never been investigated properly," he says, lighting another cigarette.

A young woman from nearby Hood College, who is

making a few dollars researching in Weisberg's basement rows of file cabinets for a television production company, says good night on the way out the door.

"They're going to say the Mafia did it," he says with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"My work differs from that of others in that I'm not pursuing a whodunit," he says. "I admit I still don't know what it means."

He talks of the timing of shots and when various photographs were taken. He talks of obscure Oswald contacts in New Orleans. He talks of Oak Cliff landladies and Dealey Plaza bullet paths.

The nick in the president's necktie? That might mean a shot from the front. Oswald's shirt? It would give him an alibi if the pattern matches that in a photograph. The wrist fragments? If there are enough of them, the single-bullet theory falls.

He says he's content. The 60 file cabinets of documents are safely bequeathed to Hood College. When the time comes, someone else will come along to keep the faith.

Fifty miles south, in downtown Washington, is the keeper of the relics.

Marion M. Johnson is the government archivist responsible for safekeeping the official records of the assassination.

Weisberg and Johnson are old adversaries, used to waging war by letter and lawsuit when Weisberg wants something the government wants to keep classified. Which has been often.

Weisberg's cluttered den is a converted bedroom. Johnson's National Archives covers a full city block in downtown Washington.

The Warren Report, on microfilm, is in the main reading room. The film collection is in the basement. There you can study a video copy of the Zapruder film all at once and then frame by horrible frame.

Up in the library-quiet second-floor East Reading Room this morning, Johnson has brought the relics out for a rare press photography session, the first in five years.

There is the almost whole "magic" bullet. The bullet fragments from the limousine. Oswald's blood-stained shirt. His pistol. His address book. Some of his diaries. The backyard photographs. And, kept in a custom-built case, the Mannlicher-Carcano rifle.

Johnson obligingly works the bolt for the CNN crew photographing the relics.

"Snick-snick ... snick-snick."

It's the only sound in the room.